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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of availability of a familiar human attachment object (the mother) and familiar inanimate attachment object (the child's blanket) on a child's emotionality and learning of a discrimination task. A total of 64, 2- and 3-year-old children were assigned to groups (nonattached, mother-attached, or blanket-attached), and given a simple conditioning-extinction-reconditioning task in an unfamiliar play setting. Children in the groups with either human or inanimate attachment did significantly better on the discrimination task with less visible distress than the children who had no attachment object available. The presence of the attachment objects also facilitated the 2- and 3-year-olds habituation to an unfamiliar environment. (Author)

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The effects of mothers and "security" blankets upon learning in children (should Linus bring his blanket to school?)

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Statement of the Problem

Young children demonstrate a high incidence of proximity to and interactions with certain soft, warm, familiar stimuli; this attachment is frequently evidenced to both human and inanimate objects (Bowlby, 1969). Within novel situations, fearfulness may develop (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970) but particular aspects of these attachment stimuli appear to inhibit the distress and facilitate exploration and play (Gershaw & Schwartz, 1971; Rheingold, 1969). Although the mother is usually considered to be the most powerful of all attachment stimuli, almost half of all middle class children also exhibit attachments to inanimate stimuli, the most common of which is the child's blanket (Weisberg & Russell, 1971). For children attached to it, this "security" blanket has been shown to be equally as effective as the child's mother in promoting play and exploration in a novel situation relative to the absence of the mother and blanket (Passman, 1972, a, b; Passman & Weisberg, in press). Familiar non-attachment objects, such as the child's favorite toy or the blanket for non-attached children, were not able to serve this facilitation function.

Under certain circumstances, fearfulness or anxiety has been demonstrated to suppress performance on learning tasks (cf., Stevenson, 1972). Yet, learning in the presence of objects which may reduce anxiety, i.e., the mother as

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a "secure base" (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970) or the "security" blanket (Passman, 1972 a, b; Passman & Weisberg, in press, Weisberg & Russell, 1971), has not been investigated.

The objective was to evaluate the effects of the availability and non-availability of two classes of attachment objects in a learning situation with children. This study examined whether the presence of a human attachment object (i.e., the child's mother) and an inanimate attachment object (i.e., the child's blanket for a child attached to it) could each mitigate emotionality and facilitate learning of a discrimination task in an unfamiliar environment compared to no such attachment object being available. The study also sought to consider whether the presence of these attachment objects would enhance learning more than a familiar stimulus which was not an attachment object (i.e., the blanket for children not attached to it). Of particular significance was the prediction of a level of blanket attachment by familiarizing object interaction, wherein discriminative control of lever pressing would be more readily established and maintained in attached children having their blanket with them than in nonattached children exposed to their blanket.

Subjects and Procedure

Two-and three-year-old children were rated by their mothers on a ten point scale of intensity of attachment to a "security" blanket (Weisberg & Russell, 1971). Six groups were formed (N=10, each), three of which contained blanket attached children (median rating 7) and three contained nonattached children (median rating 1). Each attached and nonattached child was randomly assigned to one of three conditions. Either his mother, his blanket whether or not he was attached to it, or no familiar object was to accompany him into an unfamiliar room.

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Within this room was a yellow wooden box with an opening for a tray into which automatically-dispensed M & M reinforcers could fall. To the left of the aperture was a red signal light, and to the right was a telegraph key manipulundum. Directly in front of the box was a high chair, to the right and left of which were two adult-sized chairs for the experimenter and familiar object, respectively. The apparatus was adapted from Weisberg's (1969).

Each child was seated in the high chair. Either the mother, blanket,or no familiar object was stationed to his left, out the child's reach, and remained there for the entire session (cf. Passman, 1972, a, b; Passman & Weisberg, in press). For half of the children in each of the six groups, the onset of the illuminated red light served as the discriminative stimulus for reward, while for the other half the offset of the light was the S^+. After a ten-response CRF shaping and habituation period under the S^+ condition, discrimination procedures were initiated. Signal onset and offset were fixed to alternate at six-second intervals, regardless of the subject's performance, resulting in a six-second trial period and a six-second intertrial interval. Each response to S^+ was reinforced with candy. Following 30 trials of acquisition, the two signals were presented for another 30 trials with no reinforcers being dispensed (extinction). Finally, another 30 trials duplicating the acquisition phase (reconditioning) were presented.

Results

The interaction between blanket attachment level and familiar object condition was significant (p's $\leq .01$) in the acquisition and reconditioning phases using the discrimination index (Weisberg, 1969) which was obtained by dividing the frequency of responses under S^+ by the total frequency of responses (under S^+ and S^-). Thus, in the unfamiliar learning situation,

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attached children, having their blankets near them, performed the discrimination equally as well as the children having their mothers present. In fostering adaptive behaviors that led to improved performance on the criterion measures, both of these familiarizing conditions were superior to the conditions of non-attached children having their blankets and children having no familiar objects with them (p's $\leq .05$). Distress behavior (as indexed by the number of children crying, the number of trials completed by the child, and the latency to crying from the onset of the session) was almost totally absent in these first two conditions, whereas it was reliably more prevalent (p's $\leq .05$) in the latter two conditions.

Conclusions

The results indicate that an inanimate object of high "cue weight" (Cairns, 1966), that is, one whose salient characteristics (e.g., tactual properties) have entered into a supportive relationship with an organism's ongoing behaviors, may aid in familiarizing a child to a novel situation as effectively as does a highly prominent human, social object. As indexed by distress measures, the presence of these attachment objects was superior to their absence in helping two- and three-year-old children habituate to an unfamiliar environment. Such findings with social attachment objects have been frequently seen (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Gershaw & Schwartz, 1971) and have also been evidenced with inanimate attachment objects (Passman, 1972, a, b; Passman & Weisberg, in press). Moreover, in converting a "strange" situation into a familiar one (cf., Rheingold, 1969), the presence of both social and inanimate attachment objects can significantly facilitate children's performance on a discrimination task.

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